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The West Point History of the Civil War

Jennifer M. Murray

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Review

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Rogers, Clifford J. and Seidule, Ty; and Watson, Samuel J.. *The West Point History of the Civil War*. Simon and Schuster, \$55.00 ISBN 9781476782621

An Impressive New Narrative from the United States Military Academy

Established in 1802 by President Thomas Jefferson, the United States Military Academy, in West Point, New York, stands among the world's preeminent educational and military institutions. A proud, distinguished institutional history reminds cadets of their place in the "Long Gray Line." A popular recruitment poster, complete with the iconic faces of Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Douglas MacArthur, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, declares, "At West Point Much of the History We Teach Was Made By The People We Taught" (1). West Point has authorized and produced a new series of military history texts; *The West Point History of the Civil War* is the first volume in the series. *The West Point History of the Civil War*, edited by three West Point professors in the Department of History, consists of chapters extracted from *The West Point History of Warfare*, the text used by cadets in the "History of Military Art" class. The product of a collaborative effort between West Point's Department of History and Rowan Technology, *The West Point History of the Civil War* offers an accessible, image and graphic driven narrative of the American Civil War. With six chapters authored by the field's leading historians, *The West Point History of the Civil War* explores the strategies, operations, and tactics of the Civil War, as well as the war's political causes, calculations, and consequences.

Colonel Ty Seidule, Head of West Point's Department of History, offers an introduction that narrates the Civil War's impact on the academy. On November 19, 1860, after Abraham Lincoln's election, Henry Farley of South Carolina, became the first cadet to leave West Point. During the following months, another sixty-five cadets left the academy, many who assumed positions in the Confederate army. As the war progressed, Republican congressman declared

West Point a bastion of secession and initiated efforts to abolish the academy. The successful Union military operations of Ulysses Grant, William T. Sherman, and Philip Sheridan, all West Pointers, finally quelled the calls for the abolition of West Point.

In the opening chapter, Mark Neely, a professor of History at Pennsylvania State University, addresses the origins of the Civil War and the war's early military operations. Neely aptly defines the political background to the secession crisis, outlines the mobilization of both Union and Confederate forces, and explores the advantages and disadvantages held by both sides. He narrates the dilemma of the border states and offers a summary of the opening battles at Manassas and Wilson's Creek.

The second and third chapters, written by Joseph Glatthaar of the University of North Carolina, continue the narrative of military operations in the eastern theater. Here, Glatthaar covers familiar terrain including the rise of Generals George B. McClellan and Robert E. Lee, as well as the Peninsula Campaign, Second Manassas, Antietam, the 1862 Valley Campaign, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. Glatthaar applauds the "exceptional leadership" of Lee, who capitalized on "initiative, speed, and audacity to reverse the course of the war and earn the adoration of his soldiers and the Confederate people" (134).

Steven Woodworth, professor at Texas Christian University, tackles the war's western theater. Woodworth asserts, "operations in the eastern theater therefore attracted (and still attract) attention out of proportion to their military significance and produced disproportionate effects on public opinion, foreign and domestic" (191). While both sides concentrated resources and attention to the eastern theater, mobile campaigns and decisive battle remained elusive. Unlike the eastern theater, the western theater proved more conducive to operations. The north/south flow of the rivers and the sparse population provided for greater mobility of large armies. Woodworth lauds Grant's strategic and operation success, stating, "Ulysses Grant, more than any other individual, deserves the credit for these victories" (191).

In "Coordinated Strategy and Hard War," Earl Hess, Lincoln Memorial University, narrates the final campaigns of the war. Like Woodworth, Hess emphasizes Grant's strategic and operational skill, as well as his relentless determination, as critical factors in Union victory. Grant's success in

accelerating the pace of Federal operations, combined with a “remarkable degree of coordination in Federal strategy” and the implementation of “hard war” policies allowed for Union forces to defeat the Confederacy within one year of the start of the 1864 campaigns (245). Placing Grant as the primary architect of Federal victory, Hess concludes, “The combination of strategies that Grant devised, adopted, or allowed others to employ brought the war to an end faster than if the pace of military operations that characterized the period of 1861 to 1863 had been allowed to continue” (309).

Noting that the Civil War did not neatly end with Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, James Houge, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, chronicles the period following Confederate surrender through Reconstruction. He considers strategic options available to the Confederates, namely guerrilla warfare and the relocation of the Confederate capital, as alternatives to surrender. In conclusion Houge explores the impact of the Civil War on West Point and the means of which the academy reconciled with legacy of the Civil War.

Overall, *The West Point History of the Civil War* captures the standard military narrative of the conflict. As to be expected in a West Point text, the authors approach war from the perspective of the military and political leaders, and focus heavily on the war’s conventional nature. While *The West Point History of the Civil War* offers little in the way of new interpretations of the war, its strength lies in combing the war’s narrative with a stunning array of images, graphics, timelines, and campaign and battle maps.

Jennifer M. Murray is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise. She is the author of ‘On A Great Battlefield’: The Making, Management, and Memory of Gettysburg National Military Park, 1933-2013 (University of Tennessee Press, 2014). She is currently working on a biographical study of Union general George Gordon Meade.